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INTERNATIONAL STUDENT-ATHLETES' COMMUNICATION WITH
AMERICAN COACHES

by

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A Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis explored lived experiences of former international student-athletes in communicating with their American coaches through ten qualitative interviews. Despite the large and growing number of international student-athletes within the NCAA, research on this population is scarce. To study this topic is important because the relationship and communication with their coaches' highly impacts student-athletes' performance in many aspects of their collegiate experience and beyond. The study found that cultural differences in training methods and systems, an athlete's English proficiency, a coach's personality traits and a coach's willingness to adjust to his/her athletes all affected coach-athlete communication.

Keywords: coach-athlete communication, international student-athlete, culture

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International Student-Athletes' Communication with American Coaches

Introduction

When I was 17 years old, I received an email that asked me if I wanted to study in the United States while playing intercollegiate athletics at the same time. I had never heard of this opportunity before, and I initially thought it was a practical joke or scam. When I met with the company that sent the email, however, I learned about the athletes they had helped to earn athletic scholarships to U.S. institutions and decided to see if I could find a similar opportunity. The recruiting company created a profile for me to market my athletic and academic abilities to American universities. They helped me determine all the steps necessary to get admitted to an American university. They sent my profile to schools and if schools were interested in me, they would send me an email stating they were interested in recruiting me. That's how the correspondence with American universities began. There were over 30 universities who were interested in offering me a scholarship to come and study at their school while competing for their track and field team. I created a list of schools that I was interested in and talked to the top ranked schools to see what they could offer me. The recruiting company helped me get the best scholarship deal and I decided to come to the University of Memphis.

Upon arriving in the United States as an international student-athlete in August 2011, many new experiences came my way. I was always curious about different cultures because there was not a lot of diversity in my home country. Meeting people from all different places in the world was one of the best things about my experiences in the United States. There were also many struggles and it seems like as an international student-athlete, I had more struggles compared to domestic counterparts. Coming from a

different country where English was not my first language, communication could be a struggle. Especially in the beginning, it was sometimes hard to understand certain English terms that were used in the specific sport. Understanding the American sense of humor was tough and there are many more examples of simple misunderstandings. I also found that my experiences were not unlike the many other international student-athletes I met that faced similar struggles. Part of the struggles can be attributed to cultural differences.

The United States sport system is one that is different from the rest of the world. Their best athletes come from the school-based sport system, while other countries use the club-based system (Popp, Hums, & Greenwell, 2009). Intercollegiate sports are extremely popular and are seen as “the pinnacle of elite sport competition for many athletes” (Popp et al., 2009, p. 103). Therefore, this highly competitive intercollegiate system attracts student-athletes from all over the world. Coaches recruit athletes from overseas because of the pressure to win and job security (Vieira, 2015).

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is the governing body of intercollegiate sport in the United States. They describe themselves as “a member-led organization dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes” (NCAA, n.d.c, p. 1). The NCAA includes 1,121 colleges and university across 3 divisions. There are 90 NCAA championships in 24 sports across the divisions. The divisions were created in 1973 to “align like-minded campuses in the areas of philosophy, competition and opportunity” (NCAA, n.d.c., p.1). There is a lot of money involved in collegiate athletics. Division I athletics has the most money involved and offers the most scholarships. Division II athletics only offers partial scholarships, while Division III schools do not officially offer any athletic scholarships. The average athletic budget for a

Division I school in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) is \$62.2 million (NCAA, n.d.c., p. 1). The NCAA mostly makes its money through television and marketing rights fees, and championship ticket sales provide the rest of the revenue. The revenue distribution document on the NCAA website shows that in solely Division I, \$544,580,000 in revenue is created (NCAA, 2015).

More than 460,000 intercollegiate student-athletes compete in 23 sports in the NCAA every year (NCAA, n.d.b). The number of foreign-born student-athletes has increased over the years and continues to increase (NCAA, n.d.a). In the academic year of 1999-2000, out of the 357,080 total student-athletes in all divisions of the NCAA, 5,858 (1.6%) were foreign. In the academic year of 2014-2015, out of the 489,698 total student-athletes, 18,598 (3.8%) student-athletes were foreign (NCAA, n.d.a).

Despite the large number of international student-athletes, research on this population is scarce, especially when it comes down to the interpersonal relationship with their American coaches (LaVoi, 2007). To study this relationship is important because the relationship with their coaches' highly impacts student-athletes' performance in many aspects of their collegiate experience and beyond. Communication plays a key role in the relationship between a coach and an athlete. Communication can affect athletic performance and many other aspects that relate to the international student-athlete's experience (LaVoi, 2007). Therefore, it is important to study this underexplored topic of international student-athletes' communication with their American coaches. The goal of this study is to learn more about international Division I intercollegiate student-athletes' experiences in their communication with their American coaches. Therefore, ten qualitative interviews with former student-athletes were conducted to explore this topic

and give some possible suggestions for coaches to more effectively communicate with international student-athletes.

Literature Review

Even though NCAA sports is extremely popular and student-athlete's communication with their coach can greatly influence performance and psychological processes including motivation, little research has been done on coach-athlete communication. It is important however that this understudied relationship is explored because coaches are salient figures in shaping athletes' experiences through communication (Carnmer & Sollitto, 2015). Because coach-athlete communication can highly influence athletes' experiences of sports, it is important to consistently educate coaches so their coaching skills can be improved to make a positive influence on their athletes (Buning & Thompson, 2015). Especially when it comes down to international student-athletes, it is important for coaches to know where they come from since several factors such as language and culture might play a stronger role within international student-athletes compared to domestic counterparts.

Even though the numbers of international student-athletes have increased and continue to increase, little research has been done on the international student-athletes population. As Duchesne, Bloom, and Sabiston (2011) note, "cultural diversity is increasing in the NCAA, but there is a lack of empirical research to match this growth and development in the sport" (p. 50). Athlete-coach communication research has mostly focused on antisocial communication which includes things such as compliance-gaining strategies and verbal aggression (Cranmer & Brann, 2015). This research project focuses therefore on the international student-athlete population, and especially focuses on the

coach-athlete communication since the relationship with a coach can highly impact athletic performance but can also greatly impact the collegiate experience as a whole. However, this relationship is underexplored and there is a need for more research as it relates to the interpersonal dimensions of the coach-athlete relationship (LaVoi, 2007).

Popp et al. (2009) state “some researchers who examined issues related to international student-athletes have cited a primary motivation for these young athletes to temporarily relocate is to obtain access to better coaching and facilities and because of intercollegiate athletics attractiveness” (p. 95). Domestic student-athletes who grew up with a school-based sport system, had different motivations for playing sports compared to international student-athletes who grew up with the club-based system. Domestic student-athletes viewed the purpose of sport as competition, while international student-athletes’ purpose was usually more focused on other motivations such as a way to show or express their abilities. These different motivations can come out of the established sport system athletes grow up with. Club-based systems make sports accessible to all, no matter what age, gender, race or other characteristics somebody has. This system emphasizes the improvement of health for all citizens. On the other hand, school-based systems in the United States are focused on elite competition and success in elite sport at international competitions is most important to countries like these (Popp et al., 2009). Popp et al. (2009) suggest, therefore, that their study “may offer some evidence that the way elite athletes are originally introduced to sport could impact their perspective on collegiate competition” (p. 104).

Popp et al. (2009) also emphasize that international student-athletes who participated in their study viewed their U.S. coaches as always emphasizing a “winning-

is-everything” attitude. This is the opposite of their native coaches, who usually emphasized more of the health benefits of participating in sport. They suggest that it seems like American coaches should therefore adjust their messages when trying to recruit international student-athletes, since their motivations of playing sport might be different than theirs. It is also key that international student-athletes get the right help to transition into a different culture that includes intercollegiate athletics (Popp et al., 2009). Since international student-athletes come from a complete different sport system growing up, it is also important that coaches explain more about their expectations.

Boroggreffe and Cachay (2013) explain that coaches cannot directly transmit their exact message into athletes’ minds but that the athletes have to reconstruct every piece of information that is transmitted and look at this message through their own criteria and meanings. There is always a piece of fundamental uncertainty involved in this communication. About coach-athlete communication specifically Boroggreffe and Cachay (2013) state: “A large majority of the uncertainty in coach-athlete communication is absorbed through the generalization of expectations” (p.14). These authors emphasize that expectations have been internalized “by the actors themselves through years of socialization in these specific contexts” (p.14). However, when American coaches are dealing with international student-athletes who did not grow up in these similar elite sport context (of school-based sports), these expectations might not have been internalized and they might not have gained similar experiences that formed similar foundations of meanings. So in this context, cultures can definitely create communication struggles. Different meanings can hinder the achievement of understanding. But why is this so important?

The interpersonal relationship between a coach and an athlete is a crucial factor in an athlete's development (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). LaVoi importantly states that "communication affects and is affected by the coach-athlete relationship" (p. 507). Communication is an important factor when it comes to coach-athlete relationships and a coach's communication skills can even determine how successful a coach-athlete relationship will be (Borggreffe & Cachay, 2013; Moen & Kvalsund, 2013). Social factors and structural characteristics also play a big role in the coach-athlete communication. Therefore, the communication between international student-athletes and American coaches is an important and interesting topic to study. This project is specifically related to international student-athletes' experiences in communicating with their American coaches. I focus on their experiences because this has also been an understudied topic:

International student-athletes have been studied with the purpose of identifying the motivation of those athletes to come to the United States or on their adjustment to college. Therefore, there is a need for academic research focusing on and evaluating the experience (both athletic and academic) of international student-athletes in particular. (Trendafilova, Hardin, & Kim, 2010, p. 350)

To understand how the factor of culture plays a role into this coach-athlete communication, it is important to keep some intercultural communication frameworks in mind.

Theoretical Frameworks

There are two intercultural communication theories that can be applied to this research. The first one is communication accommodation theory (CAT). This theory is aimed "at predicting and explaining many of the adjustments individuals make to create,

maintain, or decrease social distance in interaction” (Giles & Ogay, 2007, p. 293). Social dimensions always play a role in communication. Examples are gender, race/ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, age, sexuality etc. Accommodation theory can explain how people communicating with one another, navigate these differences (Giles & Soliz, 2015). As Giles & Soliz (2015) also state, “CAT is a theory that helps us understand the motivations for why we communicate the way we do with others, the nature of our communication choices, and the relational, identity and evaluative outcomes of these choices” (p.162). The theory has expanded from a sociopsychological model to an “interdisciplinary model of relational and identity processes in communicative interaction” (Giles & Ogay, 2007, p. 294). Language has always been the main focus of the theory but other symbols within communication such as dress style is also taken into account (Giles & Ogay, 2007).

“Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) assumes that communicators are motivated to adjust their speech styles with respect to one another as a means of expressing values, attitudes and intentions” (Buller & Aune, 1992, p. 39). There are two main forms of communication within this theory that can be used. They can either move you away from a person or bring you closer. Convergence is a strategy by which a communication behavior gets adapted in a way where someone becomes more similar to one’s partner (Buller & Aune, 1992). Divergence is a strategy where differences between self and the other are accentuated (Giles & Ogay, 2007). Two strategies that are similar to divergence but are subtler are maintenance and overaccommodation. Maintenance means that you persist in your original communication style and overaccommodation makes the

recipient feel worse because it is demeaning talk or message simplification (Griffin Ledbetter & Sparks, 2015).

Responses given by athletes can point to one of these strategies. How does the factor of culture play a role within their interaction and how do coaches and athletes navigate this difference? Did any of the participants or coaches use convergence or divergence, maintenance or overaccommodation or neither of these within the coach-athlete interactions? Do coaches use accommodation with their athletes or does the athlete have to accommodate to the coach? Optimally, we expect coaches' and athletes' communication style to convergence for more effective communication. Alternatively, some of the participants might converge because of expectations of the coach since the athlete decided to move to the United States to work with this particular coach. The coach ultimately holds more power in the relationship. However, if a coach notices that an athlete does not perform well enough by converging to their ways, the coach might use convergence to try to increase an athlete's performance.

The second theory that can be applied to this research is Language Convergence and Meaning Divergence (LC/MD) theory. This theory is centered around meaning and specifically the idea that common language does not always translate into common meaning. Language convergence is a common set of linguistic symbols and meaning divergence is that these linguistic symbols may have totally different meanings (Dougherty, Mobley, & Smith, 2010). The illusion of shared meaning is also key in understanding the theory, "which occurs when the convergence on symbols or language creates the false appearance that people share common meanings" (Dougherty et al., 2009, p. 39). Many communication theories have focused on language convergence but

little attention has been paid to meaning divergence (Dougherty et al., 2009). The theory has evolved out of a grounded theory study of social sexual communication (Dougherty et al., 2010). The theory was not originally meant to be applied to an intercultural communication setting but one expansion of the theory involves the relationship between language and culture (Dougherty et al, 2010). This evolved from the serious problems in international negotiations. “Very often people from different nationalities communicate in nonnative languages. As a result, the second language is always a rough translation of a native culture. Meaning divergence may be intensified in these instances” (Dougherty et al., 2010, p. 173). Sometimes the divergence is not thought about as something that evolves out of the culture, but only a speaker’s poor language skills. The goal of the development of the theory was also to “identify an interpretive theory that could be utilized by qualitative researchers” (Dougherty et al., 2009, p. 41). LC/MD theory is unique in that it is truly meaning-centered.

This theory can be applied to international student-athletes’ communication with their American coaches. Even though the theory was not originally intended to be used in intercultural settings, it can be applied because the theory gives me a chance to explore the relationship between language and culture. Specifically, within coach-athlete interactions, some English words might be a rough translation of a native culture and native language and that might cause meaning divergence. An illusion of convergence can occur because individuals might have reached an agreement on the language used to describe a concept, but meanings can be completely different and therefore, diverge (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014). Sometimes this can be explained by the fact that international student-athletes grew up in a different environment and with a different

sport system. Certain English terms may therefore have different meanings in their context compared to their coaches' context. As Boroggreffe and Cachay (2013) pointed out, coaches' generalizations of expectations can cause misunderstandings. Words might be the same (language convergence) but they might mean something different to the athlete than they do to the coach (meaning divergence) due to the different sport systems in the two countries. This can ultimately lead to misunderstandings within coach-athlete interactions.

Research Questions

This research project tries to discover the essence of meaning of former international student-athletes' interactions with their American collegiate coaches. Since the interpersonal dimension in the coach-athlete relationship is under-explored and culture is sometimes a factor that is taken for granted in the communication between coaches and athletes, data collection in this study will be guided by the following main research questions:

RQ1: How do former international student-athletes describe their experiences communicating with their collegiate American coaches?

RQ2: In what ways did former international student-athletes perceive that culture and language influenced the way they communicated with their collegiate American coach?

Methods

Design

This study is grounded in the principles of phenomenology. Phenomenology is oriented toward identifying meanings that people assign to their lived experiences and

understanding where such meanings originate. It is a way of looking at the world as we experience it ‘prereflectively’ and it is a meaning-giving method of inquiry.

Phenomenology is mostly a philosophic method for questioning (van Manen, 2014).

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) state phenomenology is “a philosophical approach to the study of experience” (p. 11). Questions may arise if we experience something that makes us pause and reflect on the experience. Smith (2013) describes phenomenology like this: “phenomenology studies phenomena: what appears to us — and its appearing” (p. 1). Reflective awareness can therefore come out of lived experiences (van Manen, 2014). Therefore, “In a phenomenological study the research question focuses on discovering the meaning of a phenomenon” (Englander, 2012, p.17).

Phenomenological studies typically use interviews with people who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, I chose this method is to conduct semi-structured interviews with former international student-athletes where I ask them to tell me about their experiences with their collegiate American coaches and how they feel like culture is an influence in the communication with their coach. By asking phenomenological questions and analyzing these interviews through coding, I will try to discover the essence of meaning of former student-athlete’s interactions with their American coaches.

Participants & Sampling

I recruited former NCAA Division I international student-athletes. I chose to interview former international student-athletes because they were more accessible for interviews than current international student-athletes. Also, by choosing former international student-athletes, I could also gain an overview of their complete collegiate

career and see if their communication with their coaches might have changed throughout the years they played sports for their school. Participants had to be born in a foreign country, speak English as their second language and had to have moved to the U.S. for their collegiate experience and resided in the U.S. for 8 years or less. Subjects were selected through snowball sampling through connections at the University of Memphis. I sent out Facebook messages to former international student-athletes that I personally knew (because of connections throughout my collegiate career) to recruit participants. I asked them for referrals to other former international student-athletes to get my ten participants.

Six participants were female; 4 participants were male. Participants included were from Germany, Finland, Latvia, Hungary, Belgium, Estonia, Spain, Jamaica, and Serbia. Their ages ranged between 23 and 25 years. Years resided in the United States varied between 3 years and 6.5 years. Seven out of the 10 student-athletes never visited the U.S. before coming to college. Sports represented in the sample were volleyball, soccer, tennis and track and field. Seven out of 8 total coaches referred to in the interviews were male. With the exception of one participant, all participants spoke English as their second language. However, the participant that spoke English as her first language, spoke a very evident, non-American English, dialect so language struggles within coach-athlete interactions could possibly still occur. I decided to include this participant also to get more cultural diversity. All of the other participants were from Europe. In the result section, participants will be coded from participant 1 through 10. Participants 1 through 4 are the male participants and participants 5 through 10 are females.

Data Collection

Data collection involved semi-structured qualitative interviews with each participant. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format (see Appendix A for interview guide) and took place in a private setting of the participant's choosing. Initially, all interviews were planned to be conducted in a physical place in Memphis. Since it was hard to recruit ten local participants, half of the interviews were conducted through Skype. Whether face-to-face or via Skype, interviews were conducted in rooms that were only occupied by the lead investigator and the participant. All measures of privacy and confidentiality required by the IRB were strictly enforced.

Data Analysis

I conducted an interpretive analysis of the interview transcripts using Dedoose online software. Interpretive analysis is “an iterative, inductive process of decontextualization and recontextualization” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1375). I began by reading each transcript and highlighting excerpts that were relevant to the study's topic. After that, I read the transcripts multiple times to make adjustments to the codes and make them more compact. I created and recreated main codes and multiple layers of subcodes. Then I made interpretations about coach-athlete communication, and I tried to discover the meaning and the essence of the ‘lived experience’ that is central in phenomenology. Coding and interpretive analysis was chosen because in phenomenological inquiry, “specific statements are analyzed and categorized into clusters of meaning that represent the phenomenon of interest” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1375). In relation to the research questions, four main topics will be discussed: culture and language within coach-athlete communication, adjustments within coach-athlete

interactions, personality traits, positive and negative communication characteristics and suggestions for American collegiate coaches. Sub questions related to the research questions that evolved from the data analysis are:

SQ1: In what ways did former international student-athletes and coaches adjust to each other and how did adjustment influence their communication?

SQ2: What personality traits do former student-athletes report hinder or facilitate intercultural coach-athlete communication?

SQ3: What features characterize more positive or negative communication experiences with coach-athlete communication?

SQ4: What advice or suggestions do former international athletes have for American collegiate coaches?

Results

Most participant's experiences with their collegiate American coaches were positive. This was dependent upon several factors discussed within this section.

Culture and Language within Coach-Athlete Communication

Culture

Culture played a role within coach-athlete interactions because the U.S. collegiate training methods and systems were different than the systems from athlete's home countries. Sometimes even the sport itself was played a different way. Participants pointed out that specific technical terms within the sport and style of play of the specific sport were different in the United States. The practice style was also different in the way that practices were longer and were generally done with bigger groups of athletes. Some participants felt that practices were not always as well planned out as practices were back

in their home countries. A few participants also pointed out the difference between the individual based approach in their home countries compared to the team based approach in the United States. The following excerpts illustrate some of these cultural differences:

- The culture is different, the lifestyle and even the game itself. Back home, volleyball is pretty quiet and everybody knows what they are doing. There is not a lot of talking and screaming on the court and in the U.S., that was the biggest shock for me, was to be so vocal on the court. So it was very different in all aspects. [Participant 10]
- It's very different, it's like for one, you have to learn how to communicate with people because you're so used to, it's like there's certain terms that you use in soccer games. Like if you want to call for the ball you use different terms back home, but here you have to call for the ball the way they call for the ball. That way they can know. And the style of play is different too and pretty much everything is different. [Participant 9]

Regarding differences in practice style, participants pointed out two important differences. Generally, practices were longer and not as well planned out as they were back in their home countries. Athletes did not always get a practice schedule on what they were doing and coaches did not always explain why it was needed in their schedule. One participant pointed out that not knowing what was on the schedule for the next day affected his relationship with his coach:

- I used to talk with my coach about everything. And we plan our work-outs together and I know exactly what I am doing every day. But when I was with him (collegiate coach), I didn't know anything about what we [were going to]

do next day or we didn't get our work-out plans. So that was the only like, thing that made me not like him as much as I could. It seemed like he didn't try to be a good coach because he didn't plan all this stuff. Which was his job, to plan our work-outs. [Participant 1]

Some of the cultural differences in practices and relationships with their coach could be attributed to the different systems within the United States and other countries. As stated in the literature review, the United States works with the school-based sport system while other countries mostly work with a club-based system. Within a club system, an athlete can have the same coach for their whole life, unless the coach leaves or athletes voluntarily decide to choose a different coach or to change clubs. Within the U.S. school system, athletes change coaches every several years as they move up throughout the school system. Therefore, a new coach every several years is unavoidable, while within the club system, getting a different coach is usually voluntarily chosen. This can cause relationships to vary. Countries that work with the club system give their athletes a chance to develop a close relationship with their coach throughout a life time. However, within the U.S. school-based system, this might not be the case. The following excerpts illustrate how these different systems create different relationships between coaches and athletes:

- I think like because we were like so close and we work together for so long like I was looking for the same kind of connection. And obviously it's impossible to make the same kind of connection in a year or two. Or even four. So, I guess in that sense it was a negative influence just because I was looking for the same thing and I like couldn't do that. [Participant 7]

- Like my coach at home, I mean I grew up with him. So I've always been with him. So he knows me, he knows my body, he knows like what I need. And I trusted him fully. And, then coming to college, he (collegiate coach) kind of messed up that trust because I tried to follow him blindly but that just didn't work. And so when I came to [my second school after I transferred], I tried to put the trust in him again and then that didn't work at first. So it took us a while to get to the point that you know I've been with my coach at home, I guess. Kind of that trust you have in the coach, that he wants the best for you. [Participant 8]

Besides differences between U.S. and international sport systems, participant seven also elaborated that this difference in closeness between the club coach and the collegiate coach could possibly be attributed to specific cultural values:

- So I think you should be building the closest relationship and you should be like taking the time to get to know your athlete. Not on the personal level but just like, what kind of athlete he or she is. And I feel like he is not doing that very well. But maybe because he is from the US, he didn't think that that was important. Whereas I'm coming in from Hungary I thought that was really important and also I feel like technically you are competing for yourself but I feel like you [are] also competing for your coach. And if you have a good relationship, if you have a close-knit relationship, then you are going to compete better. That's how I see it. [Participant 7]

Language

Language mostly played a role within coach-athlete interactions in the beginning of international student-athletes' experiences, since the participant's English proficiency

usually was not as high when they first got to the United States. They did not always understand everything and there was a bigger need for clarification in the beginning. Repetition from the coaches was more necessary in the beginning. After a period of time, athletes' English communication improved. The following excerpts illustrate how language barriers between athletes and coaches decreased over time:

- Yeah I mean in the beginning, I understood about you know 70 - 80 % of the conversations and I always figured it out eventually but maybe it was a little bit slower in the beginning. But I mean it always we always got it done but obviously in the end of my four years or after basically at the end of my freshman year I mean I understood everything and I could say everything so it definitely affected a little bit in the beginning but probably not that much. [Participant 3]
- I spoke already English before. Not like I said, as well as I do now, you know, but I mean, every now and then it was just trying to explain certain things a little bit better was a little tough but then again it's the more and more I was over here, the easier it was for me to like you know, communicate and just kind of explain certain things a little better. [Participant 5]

Interactions between coach and athlete were dependent upon an athlete's English proficiency. When athlete's English proficiency improved, their interactions with their coaches became easier and better.

Language convergence / Meaning divergence (LC/MD) theory can be applied in some of these specific instances related to language within coach athlete interactions. Dougherty et al. (2010) described that often people from different nationalities communicate in nonnative languages. This was the case with my participants. Everybody

spoke English as their second language, except for one participant, who spoke a non-U.S. variety of English. Dougherty et al. (2010) state that as a result, the second language is always a rough translation of a native culture. “Meaning divergence may be intensified in these instances” (Dougherty et al., 2010, p. 173). Sometimes the divergence is however not thought about as something that evolves out of the culture, but only a speaker’s poor language skills. Some instances were described in which the participant did not understand the coach and had to ask for clarification. When the participants were not as proficient in English, there were some instances of meaning divergence, however, they explained that both coaches and athletes kept asking questions until they understood. So LC/MD theory applied to this research because it led to the need for clarification and understanding. This also led to a closer coach-athlete relationship since they were trying to understand each other better by asking questions and adjusting their communication style.

Adjustments within Coach-Athlete Interactions

Some coaches made some adjustments to communicate with international student-athletes. The coach usually adjusted when they realized the differences between them and their athletes. Whatever the adjustment was, it led to better communication and better understanding. Accommodation was characterized by acknowledging the athletes’ backgrounds and giving them an opportunity to have input into their practices. Coaches accommodated by asking the athletes questions and acknowledging the athletes’ answers. They asked, for example, for clarification, or just showed an interest in what they used to do during their practices in their home countries. The following excerpts are clear illustrations of how this accommodation worked:

- OK, the way you play soccer back home and the way you play soccer here is different. Like the stuff that the visual that I see and the stuff that I do in the game is way different compared to their style of play. So if I would go to him I would be like coach I don't like this and I don't like that, he would listen and he would be like, OK, you go do whatever you say you want to do and if it works, it works. So, it was pretty it was a good communication. If it doesn't work, he's going to tell you that. Oh no that doesn't fit and you should do this and do it his way. But, everything was OK. Like I didn't have a problem. [Participant 9]
- It's a little frustrating sometimes but he understands the people with different cultures is [sic] going to see those things differently. And he understands that. And he doesn't push his culture on them. He understands that. He understands that people are different, they are not the same. So he just tells them what to do and if they cannot do, he will try to find a different way, how to approach that thing. [Participant 2]

Non-accommodation of the coach was characterized by the coach always wanting to do things his way and not listening to the athletes' input. It happened when the coach thought he knew best and was not willing to adjust his ways to whatever the athletes were used to before. The coaches who did not accommodate were expecting the athletes to adjust. The following excerpt illustrates the difference between non-accommodation and accommodation:

- Well at first it was nice. He has always been very nice but he wasn't really understanding. He had like one concept in mind. He is like, well this is what I do with my athletes and you're supposed to fit in there. And so it took me to

get injured. Like I pulled my hamstring. For him to understand that my body works differently than like not everybody works the same way. But after that, we had a great relationship. Like he adjusted practices on like how I felt, and he was very personal about it too. Like we actually had a really great relationship. We communicated really well about what is best. [Participant 8]

When coaches did not accommodate, athletes had to adjust to their coach's ways and accommodate. Athletes did their best to make their coaches happy and adjust in ways that he or she wanted them to adjust. They just had to accept that their coach wanted to do it a certain way and was not open to their input. The following excerpt illustrates how non-accommodation from the coach's side could lead to frustration:

- I don't think she adjusted. We had people from Serbia, Canada, Germany, Hungary, Puerto Rico, I mean we had different people come through the team and I don't think she really even tried to adjust. You know she expected all of us to adjust. And we did. But, you can't change a 100%. I mean, you are who you are. And you're adjusting but you can't expect somebody to change completely. So we make a little bit of adjustment and you make a little bit of adjustment and we meet in the middle. But with her, it was you know, pushing us to do this and do that and change this and change that and she didn't give anything back so that was really frustrating. [Participant 10]

The following excerpt illustrates how non-accommodation from a coach can lead to athletes having to adjust to hear coach's ways:

- I tried to believe in him and think that he is going to make me better. So at first I did what he asked me to do, and then later on, when some stuff didn't work out, I

tried to tell him about it. To see if he was going to accept the differences and try to change it but most of the time, it didn't change and then I just have to adjust his ways. [Participant 6]

Whether the coach or the athlete had to make adjustments, the athletes usually got used to their coaches and their ways of training. Social support from friends and teammates was an important factor within adjustment. Athletes were able to get feedback from their peers and their social support helped them navigate differences and adjust:

- I can't really say how I could have adjusted because I think that overall I adapted very quick to the culture and to the overall views of his style of coaching and his communications in certain things like that. So like I said, we clicked as a team like that very good at things so there wasn't really much that I think I could have really done. [Participant 5]
- I had a good support system, I had a good friend base and they just helped me like I didn't have I didn't ever think about oh I have to adjust. It just kind of happened by hanging out with them more. [Participant 8]

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) can be applied to the results of this section. A maintenance strategy of the coaches often led athletes to poor communication experiences. These coaches did not want to change their way to communicate with the international athletes and did whatever they thought was best. So they persisted in their original communication style and did not change anything. Sometimes they even used divergence, when coaches specifically stated that the athlete just had to go with their ways and forget what they did before. Good communication was characterized by convergence because coaches adapted their

communication behavior to become more similar to their athletes in some ways. They acknowledged differences and were then able to accommodate to their athletes by asking them how they are used to play their sport in their home countries. They also listened to their athletes and then change the practice plans according to their needs.

Personality Traits

Personality traits also affected the coach-athlete relationship and the communication within this relationship. Certain personality traits facilitating good intercultural communication while others were hindering it. Coaches' caring personality, helpfulness and friendliness facilitated good communication. Participants described coaches with a caring personality as someone who asked questions, showed care about the athlete's life outside of athletics, asked how athletes were feeling and helped out when there was a problem with anything. Friendliness and a willingness to help were sometimes also part of this caring personality. Friendliness was described as being nice to the athletes and being like a friend to them. A willingness to help in any area of the athlete's experiences, such as academics, personal life or even athletics would make the athlete feel cared for with their family being so far away. If a coach was caring, it created a better relationship and also impacted the communication in a positive way. A coach's friendliness and willingness to help, could even lead to performance enhancement. The following excerpts illustrated how caring, friendliness and a willingness to help facilitated good intercultural communication:

- Because he was so friendly to us and very nice to us and he was always there for us and everybody wanted to play for him. I think that was the real difference between him and the other coaches. That because he was there for us and he

communicated very good to us, I think everybody else on the team wanted to play for him. And I think that helped us in the long run. [Participant 3]

- He always made sure I get my schoolwork done and stuff like that. And if he knows that I'm away from my family. So anything that he could do possible to make me feel comfortable or not feel like I'm too far away even though I am from home. He always tried to do that. Not just for me but for everyone on the team like it was such a good coach. He was not just a coach but you like a mentor and a father figure and everything. So he was always there for as I said not just me but everyone. [Participant 9]

Within my sample, participants described coaches who showed more personality traits that facilitated communication than hindered communication. However, some participants pointed out that if a coach was too authoritarian, it hindered effective communication. The communication was better if the coach was more willing to listen to the athlete instead of just going with what he or she thought was best. Participant 8 illustrated this by stating, “At first he was trying to be the coach and super authoritative and talk kind of as a boss instead of as a partner. And so once that changed it got a lot better.” Other participants stated that when coaches were authoritarian, they were also not willing to listen and learn from their athletes:

- It just may be a different way he is coaching as far as people back home and he didn't really want to listen or learn. To understand how we are used to train. He just wanted to do what he is used to doing. He wanted to go his way. Cause he thought that works the best. [Participant 6]

This quote also suggests that at least some participants' experienced authoritarian coaches as a U.S. cultural trait compared to "back home."

Suggestions for Coaches

One specific question within the interviews was whether the former international student-athletes had any suggestions for American collegiate coaches in general. All participants agreed that coaches should try to understand the international athletes and know where they are coming from. They should get to know them as an athlete and know their background and personalities. Understanding and getting to know them as athletes was key in their suggestions. The following excerpts illustrate the advice these participants offered:

- Make sure you really understand it. Really understand who they are and where they're coming from. What they've been through in life and you know, understand the struggles that they have. Like, it's hard for American person coming to college being away from their family and it's a different life for them too, but much less coming way across the ocean and your family is like 6000 miles away. I mean, it's a struggle. But, that's one thing you have to understand. What they're going through and how much they invest in you know, your team and school and everything else. And appreciate them that much more because because they're making that much more effort to fit in and do what they're supposed to and give their best. So, understanding and appreciation. [Participant 10]
- I mean, I never really had a problem with that with my coach. But I guess in general, the more the coaches know about the environment of where the players come from, the better the communication will be. So basically when they recruit

just know a lot about the player of where they are coming from or even the families and stuff. So the more you know about the player's background or environment I think the communication will be better. [Participant 3]

True listening is also key for coaches so that they can understand and know their athletes well. Participants stated the importance of this by saying this like: “Actually they should listen to, to the people who come here” and “I just think he should learn to like listen. To like really listen to us.” One way of putting these suggestions into practice might be through setting up athlete-coach meetings on a regular basis as some of the athletes suggested.

Discussion

Participants' experiences with their coaches were mostly positive. Factors that shaped their experience included culture and language, adjustments and personality traits. Cultural differences in the sport itself, the practice style, training methods and systems influenced participants' experiences. Participants' English proficiency also played a role and communication got better over time, when their proficiency increased. If coaches were making accommodations for their athletes, communication was more effective than if they were not willing to make any adjustments. If coaches were helpful, caring and friendly, it facilitated effective communication while if coaches were authoritarian, it hindered effective communication. Participants suggested for American coaches to know their athletes well, to understand where they are coming from and to truly listen to them for more effective communication with their international student-athletes.

This study adds in several ways to the existing literature on coach-athlete communication. Lavoie (2007) states that little is known about the interpersonal

dimensions of coach-athlete relationships and Cranmer and Brann (2015) point out that athlete-coach communication research has mostly focused on antisocial communication. This study expands and adds to the scarce literature in the area of interpersonal athlete-coach communication by exploring participant's communicative experiences with their American coaches. In particular, it highlights both positive and negative communication between athletes and coaches. This study also did what Trendafilova et al. (2010) pointed out to be important, which was to evaluate experiences of international student-athletes. Some of the findings, particularly regarding coaches' accommodation and personality traits, may be broadly applicable to understanding coach-athlete communication, whether intercultural or not.

The dimension of culture within coach-athlete interactions was an aspect of this study that has not been specifically studied in previous studies. The study's finding that cultural differences that played a role within interactions were part of the different sport systems at times confirms what Popp et al. (2009) state about the difference in sport system (the club-based versus the school-based system). As Boroggreffe and Cachay (2013) explained in their study, different meanings can be attached to messages. While a coach thinks his/her message means one thing, an athlete can think that it means something completely different. This was confirmed by the need for clarification and understanding because of participants' low English proficiency, especially in the beginning of their time in the United States. This is consistent with LC/MD Theory.

This study also helps coaches know more about what is impacting their interactions with international student-athletes. This can help coaches increase their knowledge about this population and help them know how to improve their coaching

skills for international student-athletes. As Buning and Thompson (2015) pointed out, it is important to consistently educate coaches so their coaching skills can be improved to make a positive influence on their athletes. This study is an introduction to help coaches know more about how to effectively communicate with international student-athletes.

Participant's responses and suggestions can also lead to the development of interventions for coaches and athletic administrators. To make sure coaches understand the differences between the club and the school-based system, a mandatory training through the NCAA that teaches coaches and athletic administrators about the club-system and the cultural differences that can come with that, can lead to better navigation of cultural differences and expectation differences that might exist between coaches and international athletes. It is important that coaches and athletes are more aware and trained in the difference in sport systems and expectations. By having more knowledge about it, differences can be easier to navigate. Another intervention that can possibly be developed is a simple cultural guide, that helps coaches understand the cultural differences between the U.S. and the most commonly recruited countries. This guide can for example include main cultural beliefs of a country and differences need to be aware of. It can also include do's and don'ts for athletes from a particular country. However, this can only be used as a guide. Coaches should try to understand each individual athlete and see whether or not things from the guide are actually applicable to that individual.

By applying Language Convergence/Meaning Divergence (LC/MD) theory to this research, helps to further justify the theory as an intercultural communication theory. Since the theory was not originally meant to be applied to an intercultural communication setting, applying it to this research illustrates how the participant's nonnative language of

English could lead to instances of meaning divergence. It therefore strengthens the theory being used as an intercultural theory.

Applying Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) was helpful to apply to this research because it helped explain how coaches did or did not adjust their communication style to their athletes. CAT provided an explanation for how the athletes experienced the way coaches communicated with them. This study adds to existing CAT research showing that convergence within interactions is the most effective and will lead to better interactions. It also adds a new intergroup context (coach and athlete) in which to investigate communication accommodation.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Since the sampling technique was snowball sampling through personal connections, 9 out of 10 former student-athletes were all from one particular university so experiences could have been similar. Some experiences might have been similar because there were a couple of participants with the same coach. Two male participants were on the same tennis team with the same coach and 1 male and 1 female participant, were on the same track and field team with the same coach. Some experiences might also have been similar, because 4 of my participants were on the same track and field team, even though they did not all have the same coach. Since the sample included mostly former international student-athletes from one single university and nine out of ten participants were from Europe, it is not necessarily a good representation of the many different international student-athletes within the NCAA.

Participants also graduated a couple of years ago. None of them graduated more than 3 years ago but since I asked them to reflect upon their experience from a couple of

years ago, it might have been difficult for them to recall some of the things related to coach-athlete communication. However, because they were graduates rather than current athletes, they were able to reflect upon their entire collegiate experience. The snowball sampling strategy of this study made it also possible to include participants with whom the researcher had a personal connection. The personal connection could have possibly caused the participants to hesitate to discuss certain aspects of their experience and disclose important information. However, it might have also caused to do the opposite because the participants were more comfortable talking about their experience with a researcher who they had an established relationship with before the study.

Further Research

Further research can explore the coach's views on their interactions with international student-athletes. How do American coaches experience their interactions with international student-athletes? How do they see culture as a factor and would it be similar to what participants of this study have said or would it be different? This topic can be explored through an exploratory survey and possibly further expanded by doing in depth interviews with coaches throughout the country. Another thing for further consideration is to compare how communication between international student-athletes and their coaches is different from American student-athletes' communication with their coaches. Do American student-athletes experience communicating with their coaches in a similar way as international student-athletes or how is it different? A similar approach as this study can be taken, by doing qualitative interviews. However, maybe focus groups at several universities might also give some insights in how experiences of American athletes are shaped. Other topics that need further exploration is the experience from

international student-athletes in the United States as a whole and how their coaches can enhance their overall experience.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Demographics:

Gender -

Age -

Years in the US -

Visited the US before coming to college? – Yes/No

Sport –

Collegiate Coach – Male/Female

-Tell me how you got into playing (insert sport)

When did you start playing the sport?

Did you ever think you'd play (insert sport) in the United States?

- Tell me about your experience of coming to the United States.

What did you perceive to be the main differences compared to your country?

What did you perceive to be the similarities compared to your country?

What were some barriers you faced by living in the US?

What were some communication issues you faced by coming to the US?

- Tell me about your experience as a student-athlete in the U.S.

How did you feel about this experience?

How did this experience influence your future?

- Tell me about your relationship with your collegiate coach

How did you feel about your collegiate coach?

How did your relationship with your previous coach (before college) influence your relationship with your collegiate coach?

- Tell me about communicating with your collegiate coach.

Does your collegiate coach have a particular communication style? How would you describe it?

How did your collegiate coach adjust his/her communication style to get his point across to different athletes?

What kinds of things might affect or influence how your collegiate coach communicates?

Did your communication with your collegiate coach change over time?

How were teammates a factor in the communication with your collegiate coach?

- Tell me what you think about when you hear the term culture

How would you describe your own culture?

How would you describe American culture?

- Tell me what your thoughts are on how culture plays a role in the communication with your collegiate coach

How did you feel like your collegiate coach adjusts to culture differences that might exist between him/her and athletes from different cultures?

How did you personally adjust to culture differences between you and your collegiate

coach?

Did language play a role in the communication between you and your coach?

Did you feel any pressure to conform to your American coach's norms? Why or why not?

- Tell me about your collegiate coach's ability to communicate with international athletes in general.

How can he/she improve his/her communication with international student-athletes?

How do you think you could have adjusted to your collegiate coach's cultural expectations?

Is there anything else you'd like to add about communicating with your collegiate coach in your experience

Appendix B: IRB Approval

From: Institutional Review Board <irb@memphis.edu>
Subject: IRB Approval 4012
Date: February 25, 2016 at 5:00:49 PM CST
To: "Craig O Stewart (costewrt)" <costewrt@memphis.edu>, "Vivian Alida Catharina Maria Brandhoff (vbrndhff)" <vbrndhff@memphis.edu>

Hello,

The University of Memphis Institutional Review Board, FWA00006815, has reviewed and approved your submission in accordance with all applicable statutes and regulations as well as ethical principles.

PI NAME: Vivian Brandhoff **CO-PI:** **PROJECT TITLE:** International Student-athlete's communication with American coaches **FACULTY ADVISOR NAME (if applicable):** Craig Stewart

IRB ID: #4012 **APPROVAL DATE:** 2/25/2016 **EXPIRATION DATE:** **LEVEL OF REVIEW:** Exempt

Please Note: Modifications do not extend the expiration of the original approval

Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:

- 1. If this IRB approval has an expiration date, an approved renewal must be in effect to continue the project prior to that date. If approval is not obtained, the human consent form(s) and recruiting material(s) are no longer valid and any research activities involving human subjects must stop.**
- 2. When the project is finished or terminated, a completion form must be completed and sent to the board.**
- 3. No change may be made in the approved protocol without prior board approval, whether the approved protocol was reviewed at the Exempt, Exedited or Full Board level.**
- 4. Exempt approval are considered to have no expiration date and no further review is necessary unless the protocol needs modification.**

Approval of this project is given with the following special obligations: Thank

you,

James P. Whelan, Ph.D.

Institutional Review Board Chair

The University of Memphis.

Note: Review outcomes will be communicated to the email address on file. This email should be considered an official communication from the UM IRB.